

# From Ideology to Productivity: Reforming Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

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Early childhood education and care services in Australia are undergoing major reforms, following widespread community concern about the quality of provision in general and the viability of corporate childcare in particular. A National Quality Framework has been developed by the current Australian Government to improve the quality, access and equity of early childhood services. As with any major social, political and economic change, however, the implementation of the reform agenda is subject to complex and often competing forces. In the paper, we describe the early childhood landscape in Australia today, and the possibilities and potential barriers to carrying out the much needed reforms proposed by the Australian Government. Early childhood professionals and the wider community are embracing the opportunity to work together to achieve a transformation in the way we educate and care for young children.

Key words : early childhood, childcare, policy reform, quality, access and equity, workforce, Australia

Early childhood education and care services in Australia are rich in diversity and scope. Issues surrounding the quality of children's services are currently the subject of much debate (Brennan, 2007; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Elliott, 2006; Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion, & Goodfellow, 2007; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992). Since 2007, there has been an increased focus on early childhood policy and provision in Australia. This follows what many

commentators see as a long period of indifference and neglect under the previous Australian Government (1996–2006). Corporate childcare was allowed to flourish with little regulatory oversight (Cox, 2007; Pocock & Hill, 2007; Sumsion, 2006). The 2006 report on early childhood education and care by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicated that Australia spent less as a percentage of GDP on early education prior to school than did any other OECD country (OECD, 2006). Following the election of a new Australian Government in November 2007, early childhood provision is undergoing a major transformation, with developments in policy and funding designed to improve the quality, access and equity of early

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childhood services detailed under the general rubric the *National Quality Framework* (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008). As with all major social, economic, and political changes, however, there are complex and competing forces which affect the implementation and outcomes of reforms in often unpredictable ways.

Ideological differences have emerged through a history of diverse approaches and views about what is best for young children. Early childhood in Australia is a vibrant and dynamic arena which attracts attention and robust debate from all areas of society and many academic disciplines. In this article, we provide an overview of recent reforms in early childhood education and care in Australia, against a backdrop of diverse ideologies and potential barriers to implementation.

## **Governance**

Children's services in Australia have evolved in response to historical, political, geographic and climatic factors. While a range of specific service types for young children has emerged since the time of white European settlement, family and community responsibilities for supporting children's learning have been key principles of Indigenous ways for many thousands of years. Over the last 200 years, Australia's population has grown to 21.8 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009), with most people living in urban centres along the east and west coast. Given Australia's vast unpopulated spaces, geographic and climatic variation and culturally diverse population shaped by a long history of immigration, it is not surprising that the range of early childhood services is equally diverse and disparate, often described as a "patchwork" of services (Goodfellow, 1999).

Fundamental to any consideration of early childhood services in the Australian context is the historic separation of responsibilities for early

childhood education and care among three tiers of government and eight separate jurisdictions comprising the states and territories, which make up the nation of Australia. Since Federation in 1901, the nation of Australia has been constituted by three tiers of government; a central national government, eight separate state and territory governments, and over 600 local governments (often referred to as councils).

The central government (variously referred to as the Federal, Commonwealth or Australian Government) has constitutional responsibilities for immigration, social security, employment, education, foreign trade and defense. This government also collects and distributes the bulk of internal revenue through the taxation system (Public Interest Advocacy Centre, 2003).

The eight federated state and territory governments are New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC), South Australia (SA), Queensland (QLD), Western Australia (WA), Tasmania (TAS), Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Northern Territory (NT). These governments are responsible for criminal law enforcement, public health and school education.

Local governments are established by state and territory jurisdictions and are responsible for local area planning, local traffic and roads and the provision of some social services. All three tiers of government have some involvement in the provision of early childhood services across Australia, thus resulting in the complex and multilayered system of policy development, funding and provision of early childhood education and care in Australia today (OECD, 2006).

## **Early Childhood Services**

The early childhood years in Australia are generally understood to cover the period of life from birth to age eight. During this period, children may experience a range of care and education services from their birth through to five years, after which

compulsory full-time schooling commences. In this article we focus mainly on the provision of services and policy frameworks for children from birth to five years, and give less attention to policy frameworks covering the first years of school. This is due to the fact that full-time schooling is covered by state government Education Acts which often operate quite separately from legislative and policy frameworks that cover the years prior to school. This separation between prior to school and school policies and legislation has created an additional factor to be negotiated if reforms in early childhood education and care are to be successfully implemented, as will be discussed later.

At the time of writing, there is no common starting age for full-time compulsory schooling across Australia, as each of the states and territories have control over this under their Education portfolios. Table 1 (adapted from Atelier Learning Solutions, 2006, p.v) indicates the variation that currently exists across Australia in relation to school starting age.

While there have been some moves by governments to institute a common school starting

age by 2010, there has been no formal agreement by the state and territory governments about who will cover the cost implications, so it seems unlikely that this will take place by the target date. The persistence of this difference in school commencement age is cause for considerable fragmentation and discontinuity for families who move interstate within Australia (an increasingly common occurrence). It also has implications for the consistent provision of early childhood prior to school services, with each state and territory making separate arrangements for early childhood provision in the years before full-time schooling.

### Types of Early Childhood Services

Choice for families is fundamental to the democratic nature of education provision in Australia. The emergence of various service types in early childhood has aimed at meeting both the needs and desires of the Australian community. Families select particular services to meet their own circumstances

Table 1.

*School Starting Age in Australian States and Territories*

State or territory	Minimum age	Age in the year before Year 1	Nomenclature year before school	Nomenclature year before Year 1
NSW	4.5	Turn 5 by 31 July	Pre-school	Kindergarten
QLD	4.6	Turn 5 by 31 June	Kindergarten/pre-school	Preparatory
VIC	4.8	Turn 5 by 30 April	Kindergarten	Preparatory
WA	4.6	Turn 5 by 30 June	Kindergarten	Pre-primary
SA	4.5	Continuous entry in term after 5th birthday	Kindergarten	Reception
TAS	5.0	Turn 5 by 1 January	Kindergarten	Preparatory
ACT	4.8	Turn 5 by 30 April	Pre-school	Kindergarten
NT	4.6	Turn 5 by 30 June	Pre-school	Transition

*Note.* From "Cost/Benefit Analysis Relating to the Implementation of a Common School Starting Age and Associated Nomenclature by 1 January 2010" by Atelier Learning Solutions, 2006, *Report prepared for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs*, p. v.

Table 2.

*Types of Early Childhood Service*

<b>Long day care</b>
Long Day Care (LDC) is a centre-based form of child care service. LDC services provide all day or part-time care for children aged birth to six years who attend the centre on a regular basis. Centres typically operate between 7.30am and 6.00pm on normal working days for 48 weeks per year so that parents can manage both the care of their children and the demands of their employment. LDC centres are required to deliver an appropriate program for children. Centres are run by private companies, local councils, community organisations, individuals, non-profit organisations or by employers for their staff.
<b>Family day care</b>
Family Day Care (FDC) is where a professional carer provides flexible care in their own home for other people's children. Care is predominantly provided for children aged from birth to six years who are not yet at school, but may also be provided for school-aged children. Carers can provide care for the whole day, part of the day, or for irregular or casual care. In many states and territories, these carers are required to be registered with a FDC scheme <sup>1</sup> . A FDC scheme supports and administers a network of carers, by monitoring the standard of care provided, and providing professional advice. In some states and territories, family day carers may operate independently of a FDC scheme.
<b>Outside school hours care</b>
Outside school hours care (OSHC) services provide care for primary school-aged children (typically aged five to 12 years) before and after school generally operates, during school holidays (vacation care), and on pupil free days. OSHC services are usually provided from primary school premises such as the school hall and/or playground. Services may also be located in child care centres, community facilities or other OSHC centres located near the primary school. OSHC services are often provided by parent associations, or not-for-profit organisations.
<b>Preschool/ Kindergarten</b>
Preschool is a planned sessional educational program, primarily aimed at children in the year before they start full-time schooling <sup>1</sup> . Preschool programs are usually play-based educational programs designed and delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher. All states and territories provide funding for eligible children to access a preschool program in the year prior to school entry. In Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, and Queensland, the preschool year is known as kindergarten. Preschools are located at government and non-government school sites, LDC centres or local community venues.
<b>Occasional care</b>
Occasional care is a centre-based child care service that provides professional care for children aged from birth to five years who attend the service on an hourly or sessional basis for short periods or at irregular intervals. This type of care is used by parents who do not need professional child care on a regular basis but would like someone to look after their child occasionally; for example, if they have to attend a medical appointment or take care of personal matters. Occasional care is often provided as stand-alone services, within LDC services or preschools, at sport and leisure centres, and community centres. Occasional care is sometimes referred to as crèche.

*Note.* From *Regulation Impact Statement for Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Reforms* (pp.2-3) by Early Childhood Development Steering Committee, 2009, COAG Consultation RIS.

and often mix their use of services when and as needed. The term early childhood services encompasses a range of formal and informal education and childcare arrangements, including Long Day Care, Preschool, Family Day Care and Occasional Care. Table 2 provides a detailed description of each service type operating in Australia (Early Childhood Development Steering Committee, 2009, pp. 2-3).

There are also a number of other service types that have been established over time in response to short term government or community initiatives. Such services can often be found in rural and remote parts of the country where mainstream service provision may be limited. These services include the following:

#### *Playgroups*

These can include informal groups of parents, usually mothers, who come together for their children to play in a peer group. There are also now a number of supported playgroups, often run by charities and welfare agencies and funded through a range of government programs, to support parents and children, in particular those considered to be vulnerable. These funded playgroups are seen by some governments as a “soft entry” approach to engaging young families in community programs where interventions can be initiated as and when needed.

#### *Mobile Children’s Services*

These services can provide preschool or long day care programs. Staff usually travel to a community, bringing with them resources and equipment to provide educational activities for children. Venues include community halls, churches or local parks. Mobile services are an important feature of early childhood provision in the many remote and isolated communities throughout Australia.

#### *Multifunction Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS)*

These services were established in recognition of

the fact that many Aboriginal children do not participate in mainstream children’s services. MACS services provide opportunities for local communities to design and operate their own child care services and often incorporate a range of health and social welfare programs as part of the service delivery.

### **Implications for Licensing and Regulation**

Whatever the service type, each of the state and territory governments takes responsibility for the licensing and regulation of its children’s services. This has led to fragmentation, as each state and territory has determined different levels of child numbers and ratios of staff to children. Furthermore, minimal staff qualifications vary. In most jurisdictions, university qualified early childhood teachers are more likely to be found in Preschool or Kindergarten settings, rather than in Long Day Care settings. It is only in NSW that regulations require at least one university qualified early childhood teacher to be employed in centres where more than 29 children are in attendance.

In most other states and territories, staff in Long Day Care centres typically hold a vocational diploma from a technical college or a registered training organisation. This difference in minimal staff qualifications has important implications for quality of education and care, as research has repeatedly demonstrated that outcomes for children are directly related to the qualifications of staff, with best outcomes for children achieved by university qualified early childhood teachers (Siraj-Blatchford, Sammons, Taggart, Sylva, & Melhuish, 2006; Whitebook, 2003). This disparity between the types of qualifications required in different settings often results in three and four year old children attending multiple services, one setting for their childcare needs during parents’ work hours and another setting for a Kindergarten or Preschool education program. This disparity results in families experiencing different

policy, administrative and funding arrangements in each setting, along with increased pressure to understand the different expectations in the various settings. Communication with staff can become problematic, especially when children have additional needs necessitating clear lines of communication.

### **Bifurcation between Care and Education**

In many Australian states, responsibility for education and care is divided between different government portfolios. Emerging from a strong historic tradition emanating from the United Kingdom (UK), Australian early childhood services have traditionally been divided according to whether they are primarily providing “education” or “care”. The establishment of the “day nursery” (evolving into what is now known as Long Day Care) as a philanthropic service provided in capital cities of Australia during the late 1800s was motivated by the need to provide care for infants and young children of working and/or disadvantaged mothers. Soon afterwards, the Kindergarten Movement, also emerging from the UK, began to target vulnerable children in the years immediately prior to the commencement of compulsory schooling. This movement was responsible for the establishment of “nursery schools” (evolving into what are now known as Kindergartens or Preschools) to provide educational experiences for young children. This bifurcation between the provision of what is seen as “education” for three to five year old children, and “care” for infants and toddlers and older children whose mothers are in paid employment, remains strong in many parts of the country, and is manifested in separate funding arrangements and differing government portfolio responsibilities for different services. Preschools and Kindergartens frequently come under the auspices of state Education portfolios, while childcare most often sits within Social Services or welfare portfolios.

### **Funding for Early Childhood Services**

Throughout the last 100 years, governments have variously funded different service types according to changing conditions and social requirements. For example, during World War II (1940–1945), the Australian Government heavily supported the provision of childcare services to enable women’s workforce participation toward the war effort. Following World War II, however, the Australian Government reduced its involvement in childcare and offered women incentives to leave the paid workforce and make way for returning soldiers. Government support for childcare was consequently reduced and remained minimal until the resurgence of the women’s movement during the 1960s and 1970s when the Whitlam Labor government embarked on an ambitious plan to improve the educational outcomes of all Australian children through a significant injection of funds into early childhood education (Brennan, 1998).

Subsequent governments have focused on increasing the number of early childhood services available as a means of increasing the productivity of Australia through an expanded workforce (Pocock & Hill, 2007). Initiated by the Hawke / Keating Labor governments during the 1980s and 1990s, this expansion reached a peak in the decade from 1998 until 2008, as government policy encouraged corporate, for-profit providers to dominate early childhood service provision. Currently more than 70 % of childcare is provided by the for-profit sector, and a major proportion of this ownership is under the governance of companies listed on the Stock exchange with primary responsibilities to share holders, rather than to children and families (Pocock & Hill, 2007). The recent collapse of two of the major publicly listed childcare companies in Australia has thrown into question the relative benefits of such a policy.

The Australian Government plays a key role in funding work related child care under its

productivity agenda. This arrangement provides parents of young children access to subsidies under the Child Care Benefit Scheme to enable their participation in the workforce or work related study. It is important to note that Australia has only recently announced the provision of a broad based paid parental leave scheme. Currently it is one of only two OECD countries (along with the USA) which does not have a comprehensive paid parental leave scheme (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The Australian scheme will not begin until 1 January 2011. Current legislation provides for 12 months unpaid parental leave following the birth of a child. It is at the discretion of individual industrial awards or employers as to whether any paid leave is provided. In a recent large scale study of Australian childcare arrangements involving 677 families, it was found that 66% of children first experienced out of home care in their first year of life, and that the average age for starting in childcare was 10.1 months (Bowes, Harrison, Sweller, Taylor, & Neilsen-Hewett, 2009). Most parents in Australia do not have access to any paid parental leave, which may account for the number of children entering childcare in their first year.

In addition to the Child Care Benefit Scheme, the Australian Government and most state and territory governments provide some form of subsidized prior to school education for children from the ages of three or four years. A number of jurisdictions offer a fully funded Preschool entitlement in the year prior to full-time schooling while other states make some provision, but participation in Preschool education is at the discretion of parents and dependent on their capacity to meet the costs of fees. In NSW for example there is no state government based entitlement to free Preschool education; however, the State government does subsidise the attendance of four year old children in funded Preschools and Long Day Care centers. Average fees can be as high AUD 38.50 per day (Council of Social Service of NSW, 2009).

### **The Need for Major Reforms in Australian Early Childhood Policy**

In recent years, advances in research and neuroscience have led to increased social and political awareness of the importance of the early years for children's learning (Goswami, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). It is now accepted that children begin learning from birth and that the nature and quality of early experiences are fundamental to later outcomes. Along with this growing understanding of the early years has been an increase in the number of young children participating in early childhood education and care services, due to the rise in women's workforce participation. Recent research has indicated that 57% of mothers return to the workforce by the time their child turns two, increasing to 68% by the time the child is three (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2003). Together these circumstances have led the Australian Government to take an increasing interest in early childhood as a social policy imperative.

Combined with increasing international interest in early childhood as a public policy responsibility has come increased pressure from a number of international reports revealing Australia's relatively poor performance on a number of measures regarding early childhood education and care (Adamson, 2008; OECD, 2006; Press & Hayes, 2000). These reports also highlighted the gap between the academic achievement of Indigenous Australian children and their non-Indigenous counterparts, with far-reaching effects. In comparison with the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous Australians experience a shorter life expectancy and a higher child mortality rate (Robinson, Eickelkamp, Goodnow, & Katz, 2008). They are less likely to stay at school until Year 12 (the final year of full-time schooling for Australian children) and are more likely to be unemployed into adulthood (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP), 2009). Other groups of children

are also affected. A recent Australian government report has suggested that around 30 per cent of all Australian children are missing out on early childhood education in the year before schooling (SCRGSP, 2009). The OECD (2008) economic report has summarized the current situation as follows:

While Australia fares well in international comparison with regards to Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test scores for 15 year-olds, important challenges remain in all education sectors, especially in early childhood education and care. Reducing complexity and fragmentation in this area and tackling issues of under-supply and inequity in access are of major importance, given the beneficial impact of early education on later outcomes. Participation in pre-primary programmes remains low as does government spending on such services. Many disadvantaged children miss out, though they are those with the highest payoff from early childhood education (OECD, 2008, p.6).

### **The Australian Government's Reform Agenda for Early Childhood**

In response to this growing international awareness of the importance of the early years, and with a change of Australian Government in 2007, a new era for early childhood in Australia has commenced. Immediately following its election, the new Australian Government moved swiftly to initiate a number of ambitious reforms to the early childhood sector, by promoting a national approach to quality standards, equity of access and a national early years learning framework. As noted above, one of the most important tasks in implementing reform is to overcome the fragmentation and patchwork nature of current service provision. In order to achieve this, the Australian government has reinvigorated the powers of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). This cross jurisdiction council includes representatives

from all three tiers of government with each of the states and territories represented. The brief given to COAG in 2007 was to review current responsibilities of the various tiers of government and to consider ways of creating a more nationalized approach to early childhood education and care, as recommended by the OECD (2006).

The core of the Australian Government's reform agenda focuses on three key aspects of early childhood services:

- national quality standards and enhanced regulatory arrangements
- a quality rating system, and
- a national early years learning framework.

(Early Childhood Development Steering Committee, 2009).

Within this broad agenda are a number of policy commitments (Australian Labour, 2007). These include a commitment to provide universal access to a Preschool program for all children in their year prior to full-time schooling. This is to be a play-based education program delivered by a university qualified early childhood teacher. In order to achieve this goal, it is widely recognized that there is a need to increase the early childhood workforce and strengthen its capacity. A range of workforce strategies has also been announced to address this matter. We will now discuss each aspect of the reform agenda in turn.

### **National Quality Standards and Enhanced Regulatory Arrangements**

#### ***The Current System***

As noted above, each of the eight states and territories has independent regulatory requirements for the licensing of early childhood services. State and territory based regulations generally deal with structural elements of quality. These may include requirements for the physical environment, administrative processes for the operation of a service,



the numbers and qualifications of staff required, along with requirements for staff to child ratios and the size of groups in which children are organized. Regulations are expressed as minimum standards that are required for the operation of an early childhood service.

In addition to this state and territory based regulatory framework, the Australian Government, in 1993, introduced a Quality Improvement and Accreditation System for all Australian Government funded childcare services. Childcare providers were held accountable for the substantial government funds being directed into work-related childcare. This system, now known as Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA), is unique in the world, as it is the first childcare quality assurance program linked to government funding through legislation. It aims to move beyond the structural elements of quality to measure the effectiveness of process elements such as the interactions between staff, families and children, the educational program and the extent to which these contribute to children's health, safety, education and wellbeing. This system is fully funded through the Australian Government and administered by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC, 2006). At the time of writing this paper, CCQA does not extend to state or territory funded services such as Preschools and Kindergartens.

Many services, however, such as Long Day Care centres, are required to comply with both state and CCQA standards, leading many early childhood staff to report that:

...accreditation and regulation boundaries became blurred and completing the disproportionate amount of paperwork for both systems impacted on the practitioners' time, taking them away from their teaching and community engagement and affecting capacity for professional planning and decision making for children. Professional judgment, wisdom and knowledge in relation to delivering quality programs were sidelined to address the emphasis on compliance and risk management (Expert Advisory

Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009, p.6).

Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion and Goodfellow's (2007) study of the impact of the regulatory environment on early childhood staff supports this, and the authors note that while early childhood professionals recognize the importance of regulation and quality assurance, the systems in place are perceived to be unnecessarily burdensome.

### *Proposed Reforms*

It is the intention of the reform agenda to investigate ways to streamline both the regulatory and quality assurance systems to create a single national standard that addresses both structural and process elements of quality. This is a highly ambitious proposal and will require the agreement of all jurisdictions about what constitutes quality outcomes for children. Given the large differences between the jurisdictions, particularly in relation to requirements for qualifications of staff and ratios of staff to children, reaching an agreement that is nationally accepted and cost effective is indeed a challenge for the Australian government.

## **A Quality Rating System**

To complement these enhanced regulatory and quality assurance arrangements, the Australian Government proposes to introduce a stratified rating system with the dual aims of promoting continuous improvement in service providers and providing parents with robust and relevant information about the quality of care and learning at each setting. This proposed rating system extends on the existing CCQA system, where services are currently rated as either accredited or not accredited, by including a differentiated rating scale. The introduction of a rating scale would provide parents and communities with more specific detail about the quality of a service,

while at the same time encouraging services to strive for the highest rating, thus positioning themselves as more desirable in the competitive marketplace.

Under this proposal, services would be rated on the following seven quality areas (Early Childhood Development Steering Committee, 2009, p. 64) :

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's wellbeing, health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements including ratios and qualifications
5. Relationships
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Leadership and service management

At the time of writing, the Australian Government is undertaking an extensive consultation process on all aspects of the national quality standards, the enhanced regulatory arrangements and the quality rating system. There remains much detail for the Australian Government to provide on how such a national quality framework might be realized.

### **A National Early Years Learning Framework**

The development of an early years curriculum, titled *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) is an important cornerstone in the Australian Government's initiatives to ensure nationally consistent quality education across a range of early childhood settings. The Early Years Learning Framework has been developed to take account of the various jurisdictional approaches and to provide broad coverage of children's experiences in a range of service types catering for children from birth to five years and their transition to school. Services including Family Day Care, Long Day Care, Preschools and early intervention services are the

focus of this Framework; however, it is anticipated that the document will also be a useful resource for families, associated allied health and welfare professionals and the broader community who have an interest in young children.

The Framework recognizes the diversity of cultural, spiritual and theoretical approaches to early childhood education across Australia. It is based on the assumption that each early childhood setting should offer a unique and contextually relevant experience for young children and their families. The intention of the Early Years Learning Framework is not to provide a uniform way of teaching young children but rather it "guides educators in their curriculum decision making and assists in planning, implementing and evaluating quality in early childhood settings. It also underpins the implementation of a more specific curriculum relevant to each local community and early childhood setting" (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009. p. 8).

There is scope within the Early Years Learning Framework for educators to respond to the particular ways and understandings of each service in providing this support to young children's learning. The Early Years Learning Framework represents a landmark in bringing together the multiple perspectives of the Australian community about how best to support children's learning. It is a strong statement of commitment about the entitlement of all Australian children to rich opportunities to learn in ways that are contextually relevant, family inclusive and supported by the community.

### **Universal Access to Early Childhood Education with a University Qualified Early Childhood Teacher**

Another reform initiative involves the development of a more integrated and comprehensive early childhood education through the provision, by 2013, of universal high quality access for all four year old

children. The emphasis in the initial stages will be given to Indigenous children in an attempt to enhance their numeracy and literacy achievements at school entry, with increased resources to be provided within universal programs for children with diverse learning rights. The involvement of university qualified teachers to deliver these programs will require a reorganization of existing practices within many early childhood services. While it is common for early childhood teachers to be employed in Preschools and Kindergartens, NSW is the only state that has a regulatory requirement that university qualified teachers are to be employed in Long Day Care services. For the policy to be successful and capture all children in their year prior to full-time schooling, it will be necessary for other states and territories to reconsider their existing arrangements.

In many states children attend a mix of Long Day Care and Kindergarten settings. Four year old children often attend a Preschool or Kindergarten to receive their state based allocation of an early childhood education program delivered by an early childhood teacher. Outside of the hours of this provision, children may attend a separate Long Day Care service. It has been widely acknowledged and indeed recognized by the OECD (2006), that this divide between education and care services is not only disruptive to children and families but does not provide for the continuity of education and care experiences that is recommended for young children.

It is also noteworthy that the cost of this universal provision to Preschool will not be fully funded. Separate Commonwealth and state and territory agreements have been signed, leaving decisions about meeting the costs of this provision to each jurisdiction. As mentioned earlier, while a number of states and territories have for some time provided fully funded preschool provision for children in their year before school, some states still require parents to contribute by way of weekly fees. It appears that under the Commonwealth and state partnership agreements, this situation will remain.

### **A More Highly Educated Early Childhood Workforce**

It is widely accepted that the success of the government's reform agenda will rely on a strengthened early childhood workforce. As in many countries, most early childhood teachers receive less income than those employed in the primary and secondary education sectors. Staff working in Long Day Care, who are mostly female, tend to experience low status and relatively poor working conditions. In many jurisdictions, unqualified staff working in Long Day Care receive no more than the minimum wage (Watson, 2006). The childcare sector in particular experiences high staff turnover and for some time now has reported chronic staff shortages. According to Warrilow and Fisher (2003), this situation has resulted in pressure to employ staff with minimal or no qualifications into positions of considerable responsibility. This is relevant to the quality of early childhood education, as research has repeatedly demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between high staff qualifications and positive outcomes for children.

To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff, the Australian Government has introduced free education for students undertaking a Diploma in Children's Services qualification and has opened up additional Commonwealth supported places for students studying for a university early childhood teaching degree. While attention is given to recruiting students into training places, there has at this time been no announcement regarding strategies to address the long term difficulties of retaining staff in the prior to school sector.

### **Potential Barriers to Success of the Initiatives**

The National Quality Agenda requires a major transformation in early childhood education and care

policy and practice in Australia. A number of barriers may affect how successfully reforms may be implemented.

### ***Conflicts of Interest***

There are conflicting interests between not-for-profit providers and for-profit providers in relation to the key elements which underpin quality as defined in the National Quality Framework: staff qualifications, staff-child ratios and group sizes. A particular challenge is to develop a system of quality assurance which encourages and rewards excellence, rather than simply regulates for minimal standards.

### ***Lack of Pedagogical Leadership***

To successfully implement the Early Years Learning Framework there is a need for pedagogical leadership from qualified early childhood teachers in many if not most early childhood settings. This will need to be adequately funded according to principles which support sustained educational change and will require an ongoing commitment and funding for at least the next decade.

### ***Bifurcation of Education and Care***

The differences between so-called “education” and “care” will need to be addressed through public awareness programs, and improved pay and working conditions to encourage qualified staff to work in Long Day Care settings.

Ongoing collaboration and cooperation between the many jurisdictions involved in early childhood education and care will be required over a long period to successfully introduce national standards and quality assurance. Reducing the complexity and fragmentation in this area and tackling issues of under-supply and inequity in access are of major importance, given the beneficial impact of early education to later outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The reforms initiated by the current Australian Government are ambitious and will require determination and courage to implement. Many early childhood professionals feel excited and reinvigorated by the potential to transform the way we educate and nurture our youngest citizens in Australia.

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